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Profile Enhancement as Information Signaling in Algorithmic Intimacy Platforms: Evidence from Chinese Xiangqin Apps

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Abstract. Digital matchmaking platforms increasingly function as service systems that coordinate user interaction through structured profile fields, verification mechanisms, and algorithmic ranking. Within these environments, user profiles operate as information interfaces through which service participants signal social attributes and negotiate visibility. This study examines profile enhancement as a user strategy within platform-based intimacy service systems, focusing on Chinese xiangqin (marriage-oriented) apps where marital compatibility is operationalized through highly structured profile architectures. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the research combines a survey based on the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (N = 201) with qualitative interviews (N = 8) among Shanghai users. PLS-SEM results show that attitude and perceived behavioral control significantly predict profile-enhancement intention, whereas subjective norms do not exert a significant direct effect. Qualitative findings reveal that normative pressures remain influential but operate indirectly through platform verification rules, algorithmic visibility constraints, and familistic evaluation embedded in the service system. Two strategic patterns of user behavior emerge: defensive enhancement, driven by competition for algorithmic visibility, and reverse enhancement, oriented toward risk management and audience filtering. By conceptualizing profile enhancement as an interaction strategy within digitally mediated service infrastructures, this study contributes to service informatics by explaining how user agency, cultural expectations, and platform governance mechanisms jointly shape behavior in algorithmically coordinated service environments.

Keywords: platform-based service systems; algorithmic visibility; profile enhancement; digital service governance; xiangqin apps; TPB

1. Introduction

Digital platforms have become central infrastructures for coordinating interactions in contemporary service ecosystems (Maisak et al., 2025; Milosevic et al., 2024). Through standardized data structures, verification mechanisms, and algorithmic recommendation systems, platforms transform individual attributes into structured information signals that enable large-scale service coordination. In such environments, user profiles function as critical interfaces through which personal information is encoded, interpreted, and ranked within the system. By organizing user-generated data into searchable and comparable formats, platforms enable matching processes that resemble service allocation mechanisms in other digital markets, such as ride-hailing, accommodation sharing, or professional networking (Szanto et al., 2024). Consequently, understanding how users strategically interact with these informational interfaces is essential for analyzing behavior within platform-based service systems.

In algorithmically mediated services, the visibility and evaluation of participants are strongly influenced by how information is structured and presented. Platform architectures typically impose predefined fields, ranking metrics, and recommendation algorithms that govern the circulation of user profiles within the system. These informational constraints transform personal attributes into signals that influence service outcomes such as matching probability, exposure frequency, and perceived reliability. As a result, users do not simply present themselves authentically; rather, they adapt their information disclosure strategies to align with the platform's algorithmic logic and evaluation criteria. This phenomenon can be conceptualized as profile enhancement, a strategic practice through which users modify, highlight, or selectively present profile information to optimize their visibility and interaction outcomes.

While profile enhancement has been examined in the literature on online self-presentation and impression management, most existing studies focus on Western dating platforms characterized by relatively flexible profile architectures and comparatively weak institutional constraints. In these environments, self-presentation strategies often emphasize personal preferences, lifestyle attributes, or aesthetic signaling. However, less attention has been given to digital platforms that embed stronger social norms and institutionalized evaluation criteria into their service infrastructures. In such contexts, information structures are not merely technical interfaces but also mechanisms through which cultural expectations and governance rules are operationalized within the platform.

Chinese xiangqin apps—marriage-oriented matchmaking platforms—represent a distinctive form of platform-based service system in which these dynamics are particularly visible. Unlike casual dating applications, xiangqin platforms integrate family expectations, socioeconomic indicators, and institutional verification procedures into their information architectures. Core attributes such as education level, occupation, income, property ownership, and household registration (hukou) are frequently encoded as structured data fields and may be subject to verification by the platform. These attributes function as key informational signals for evaluating marriage suitability and are often prioritized in algorithmic matching processes. Consequently, the platform effectively translates culturally embedded criteria of marriageability into data-driven matching mechanisms.

Within this structured environment, users must navigate a complex informational landscape where both algorithms and other participants evaluate their profiles. As profiles become standardized representations of personal attributes, users often engage in profile enhancement practices to influence how they are ranked and perceived. Such strategies may involve emphasizing socially desirable attributes, strategically omitting potentially disadvantageous information, or adjusting the presentation of personal data to align with platform norms. These behaviors are not simply individual acts of impression management but responses to the informational governance structure of the service system itself.

To analyze the determinants of profile enhancement behavior in this context, this study adopts the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) as a theoretical framework. TPB provides a well-established model

for explaining how attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control influence behavioral intentions. When applied to platform environments, these constructs can help explain how users evaluate the benefits, constraints, and social expectations associated with modifying their profile information. In particular, the theory allows us to examine how platform rules and cultural expectations interact to shape user decision-making within algorithmically mediated service systems.

Building on this framework, the present study investigates profile enhancement strategies among users of xiangqin apps in Shanghai. Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, the research combines quantitative analysis through partial least squares structural equation modeling (PLS-SEM) with qualitative interviews to capture both the structural determinants and contextual interpretations of user behavior. The quantitative component identifies the factors influencing users' intentions to enhance their profiles, while the qualitative analysis explores how these strategies are shaped by platform governance mechanisms, algorithmic visibility dynamics, and family-oriented cultural expectations.

By conceptualizing profile enhancement as an information strategy within digitally mediated service infrastructures, this study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, it extends research on platform-based service systems by examining how users adapt their information practices in response to algorithmic governance structures. Second, it contributes to service informatics by demonstrating how structured data fields and recommendation algorithms shape user strategies within matchmaking platforms. Finally, the study provides empirical insights into how culturally embedded expectations interact with platform architectures to influence behavior in digital service environments.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews relevant literature on platform-based service systems, algorithmic governance, and online self-presentation. Section 3 describes the research methodology and data collection procedures. Section 4 presents the empirical results from the quantitative and qualitative analyses. Section 5 discusses the implications of the findings for platform governance and digital service systems, and Section 6 concludes with limitations and directions for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Algorithmic Visibility and the Governance of the Self

Situated at the intersection of mobile media and algorithmic culture, the profile has moved well beyond a "static interface for self-expression." It now operates as an institutionalized device that organizes visibility and comparability within platform-mediated intimate life (Huang & Hancock, 2022; Birnbaum et al., 2020). Across fast-moving, low-cue mobile dating environments governed by algorithmic sorting, profiles perform a distinctly epistemic role: they compress complex, shifting personhood into a quickly readable and rankable form of computable identity (van der Zanden et al., 2021; Centelles et al., 2021). Where users must make rapid judgments of attraction and credibility from sparse signs, meaning-making around profiles is not freely improvised; it is shaped by the platform's pre-configured regimes of visualization and ordering (Wu & Liu, 2024). In this sense, the profile is not merely a display surface but a core structuring infrastructure of platformed intimacy: through algorithmic rules and interface constraints, it governs who enters others' fields of attention (visibility), how one becomes intelligible as a relational subject (legibility), and by what criteria one is screened into subsequent interaction (filterability).

Existing scholarship has mapped this process in substantial detail, showing how users mobilize photos, text, and narrative style as multimodal tactics to manage attention and negotiate being seen, and how these tactics are coupled with interface design, recommendation systems, and platform preferences (Birnbaum et al., 2020; Waling et al., 2022; van der Zanden et al., 2022; Kim, 2022). At an ontological level, however, this tradition often takes for granted the "free-form" profile architectures exemplified by Tinder and Bumble. Users are presumed to enjoy considerable autonomy over content arrangement,

while structured fields (e.g., education, occupation, family background) are treated as supplementary details rather than as consequential algorithmic thresholds or vectors of cultural discipline (Sharabi & Caughlin, 2019; Peetz, 2023; Zheng & Lin, 2023). The limits of this premise become clear when representational space is more rigid—when fields carry explicit cultural priorities and are tightly coupled to platform classification systems. Under these conditions, we still lack adequate explanation of how users respond, through the profile, to institutional demands and normative pressure. Put differently, current research has not fully theorized the profile as an instrument of institutionalized discipline in high-density cultural contexts—leaving a significant blind spot for understanding practices on highly normative platforms such as Chinese xiangqin apps.

2.2 Codifying Marriageability: Platforms as Infrastructures

If much Western scholarship on mobile dating tacitly assumes free-form profile architectures and a horizon of networked individualism, Chinese xiangqin apps offer a telling counterpoint. Here the app is not merely a conduit for encounters. It is a platform infrastructure that folds familism and marriage-as-institution into its very design, organizing—and amplifying—an intimate order through digital classification and circulation (Ji & Yeung, 2014; Shen & Qian, 2023; Zhou, 2023).

This institutionalization is most visible in how marriageability is rendered into fields and made comparable. Core evaluative information is stabilized as compulsory profile attributes, producing a standardized representational system of "marital capital" that places users into frameworks of categorization and ranking before interaction even begins (Zhou, 2023; Peetz, 2023). Recommendation and screening on these platforms typically hinge on such structured data, which in turn hardens cultural scripts into algorithmic rules and elevates their evaluative weight (Liu & Lin, 2021; Chang & Zhang, 2024).

Verification systems—real-name registration and credential checks for education and occupation—further install a regime of authenticity discipline. Profile construction becomes closer to a verifiable, assessable, quasi-contractual process than to stylized affective exploration (Shen & Qian, 2023; Chan, 2020; Chang et al., 2025). Prior work has documented the gendered and capital-oriented character of self-presentation in xiangqin contexts, emphasizing how positioning strategies are constrained by norms of acceptability and by the platform's allocation of visibility through weighting and ranking (Liu & Lin, 2021; Zhou, 2023). What remains under-theorized are the micro-mechanisms through which this constraint is managed in practice: within a profile architecture jointly organized by rigid fields and normative authority, how do users amplify, downplay, and recompose information to dynamically recalibrate the visibility of their marital capital? Addressing this question provides a necessary entry point for conceptualizing profile enhancement on xiangqin platforms as a structured practice rather than an idiosyncratic tactic.

2.3 Profile Enhancement as a Structured Practice

Building on the foregoing discussion, this article treats profile enhancement as a strategic entry point for explaining self-presentation on xiangqin platform infrastructures. In much of the digital intimacy literature, "enhancement" is typically framed as selective visual and textual optimization within the bounds of plausibility—an effort to increase appeal by moving along a "real-idealized" continuum (Kim et al., 2023; Guenther et al., 2023). That formulation, however, is largely derived from open-ended dating apps, where enhancement often takes the form of soft tactics—lighting, angle selection, or strategic vagueness. In the more institutionalized field of xiangqin platforms, enhancement is better understood as structured positional adjustment: within compulsory fields and a regime of comparability, users foreground advantaged attributes, soften disadvantageous cues, and reorder informational priorities to recalibrate their algorithmically mediated visibility within a system of "marital capital" (Shen & Qian, 2023). In this sense, enhancement is an agentic practice enacted in the interstices of a sociotechnical structure; its production cannot be reduced to individual motivation alone and must

instead be examined through the dialectic of structure and agency (Sinh & Kiet, 2025).

To account for how intentions toward profile enhancement take shape, the article adopts the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and situates it explicitly within the high-normativity, high-structure institutional setting of xiangqin apps. From this vantage point, attitudes (ATT), subjective norms (SN), and perceived behavioral control (PBC) are treated not as decontextualized psychological variables but as situated drivers that crystallize through the joint force of cultural scripts, platform architecture, and institutionalized regimes of visibility (Rahayu et al., 2025).

First, attitude (ATT) on xiangqin platforms is less about aesthetic preference than about an instrumental assessment: whether enhancement can improve marriageable visibility and competitive standing under platform sorting (Baek & Lee, 2025; Konings et al., 2024; Oktavia & Angela, 2024). When users come to see enhancement as an effective means of strengthening their position in a marriage market rendered legible by the platform, they are more likely to endorse the practice—and this evaluative orientation, in turn, elevates intention (H1).

Second, subjective norms (SN) exhibit a more explicitly external orientation in xiangqin contexts. Beyond peer appraisal, familism and intergenerational expectations often constitute the more binding normative reference points (Truong et al., 2026; Liu & Lin, 2021). Because marriage is widely treated as a node of family reputation and social positioning, users often anticipate how their profile will read against what family members are expected to recognize as an "acceptable" or "proper" self. In this cultural–institutional field, subjective norms do not merely shape what gets presented; they also intensify the perceived necessity of enhancement as a form of normative compliance (H2).

Finally, perceived behavioral control (PBC) takes on a distinctive institutional character on xiangqin platforms. Users typically recognize that some profile elements are readily adjustable (photos, hobbies, textual descriptions), while others are structurally resistant to change (hukou status, education credentials, income), making feasibility judgments inseparable from platform and social constraints (Ajzen, 1991; Zadeh et al., 2023). Where users believe they can operate the profile effectively within these constraints—even if only by maneuvering within a subset of fields—their intention to enhance strengthens alongside an increased sense of control (H3).

Re-specified through this cultural and infrastructural lens, TPB is mobilized here to show how institutional structure, cultural scripts, and platform classification systems jointly shape intentions toward profile enhancement, providing a single theoretical fulcrum for the quantitative tests and the qualitative interpretation that follow.

3. Methodology

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design to examine profile enhancement intention on xiangqin apps, following a "quantitative identification of structural relationships - qualitative interpretation of underlying mechanisms" logic. In the quantitative phase, we tested a TPB-based structural model to identify key paths associated with intention. In the qualitative phase, we interpreted these statistical relationships within the institutionalized context of xiangqin platforms, explaining how constructs such as attitude, subjective norm, and perceived behavioral control are experienced, understood, and translated into self-presentation practices through the interaction of familism-based norms, platform field structures, and visibility discipline (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2017).

For the quantitative phase, participants were adult users who had lived or worked in Shanghai for at least six months and had actively used xiangqin apps within the past three months. To ensure that the sample was more likely to be in a life stage directly exposed to normative pressures associated with the marriage institution, the minimum age was set at 22 years. Data were collected between December 2024 and January 2025 via Wenjuanxing, using snowball recruitment through social media and peer networks. After data cleaning, the final valid sample was N = 201. The structural model was tested using PLS-

SEM, and analyses and reporting followed established methodological recommendations (Hair et al., 2021).

Measurement followed a "validated scales with contextual adaptation" approach. Items for TPB-related constructs were primarily adapted from established scales, with semantic adjustments to align with research on digital self-presentation. All items were measured using a 7-point Likert scale and were subjected to a translation–back-translation procedure and content validity review to ensure cross-language semantic equivalence and contextual fit. The number of items and measurement sources for each construct are reported in Table 1.

Table 1. Constructs, item count, and measurement sources

Construct	Number of Items	Sample item	Measurement Source
Attitude(ATT)	6	"Enhancing my profile on a xiangqin app is a good idea."	Adapted from Taylor & Todd (1995)
Subjective Norm (SN)	6	"People who are important to me expect me to enhance my profile on a xiangqin app."	Adapted from Taylor & Todd (1995) and Mathieson (1991)
Perceived Behavioral Control (PBC)	6	"Enhancing my profile on a xiangqin app is entirely within my control."	Adapted from Taylor & Todd (1995)
Intention to Enhance (IN)	6	"I intend to enhance my personal profile on a xiangqin app in the near future."	Adapted from Taylor & Todd (1995) and Kucuksta et al. (2015)

In the qualitative phase, sampling followed the explanatory sequential design principle of sample integration, and the inclusion criteria were consistent with those used in the quantitative phase. Using purposive sampling combined with snowball recruitment, we recruited Shanghai xiangqin app users (N = 8) (participant profiles are reported in Table 2). The interview guide was developed based on the main findings from the quantitative phase. It focused on how participants understood and practiced profile enhancement, and how platform verification mechanisms, family expectations, and field constraints shaped their perceived normative pressure, risk assessment, and perceived feasibility. Interviews were conducted via online voice calls or video conferencing (60–80 minutes). With informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, checked for accuracy, and imported into NVivo. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006). Through iterative coding and theme development, we identified sociotechnical mechanisms that helped explain the quantitative paths.

By integrating quantitative model testing with qualitative mechanism interpretation, this study aimed to conceptualize profile enhancement as a structured practice jointly shaped by cultural scripts, platform structures, and users' strategic actions, rather than explaining the phenomenon only through associations among variables.

Table 2. Profile of interview participants (N = 8)

Participant ID	Gender	Age	Education	Occupation Category	Xiangqin App Use Experience
P1	F	31	Bachelor	Corporate employee	Multiple apps, 1–2 years
P2	F	28	College	Internet services	Single app, < 1 year
P3	M	29	College	Service industry	Single-app, < 1 year
P4	F	24	Bachelor	Media	Multiple apps, 2–3 years
P5	M	35	Master	Public sector	Single app, 1–2 years
P6	F	30	Master	Education-related	Single app, 3 years
P7	F	26	Bachelor	Sales	Multiple apps, 2 years
P8	M	37	Master	Arts	Single app, < 1 year

4. Results and Discussion

4.1 Quantitative Phase: Findings and Theory-Driven Interpretation

This chapter first reports the PLS-SEM-based quantitative results, with the aim of identifying statistical regularities in the structure-intention relationships. It then integrates qualitative interview materials to conduct an in-depth sociotechnical unpacking of the pathways identified in the quantitative model.

4.1.1 Sample Characteristics

A total of 201 valid questionnaires were retained and included in this analysis. Because the survey used forced-response settings, there were no missing values. Data quality screening followed standard SEM procedures. Responses with substantially short completion times and highly patterned response behavior were removed to improve data stability (Hair et al., 2019).

As shown in Table 3, the sample was concentrated in the 22–39 age group (91.1%), with a slightly higher proportion of women (55.2%). Overall educational attainment was high, with bachelor's degrees (51.7%) and master's degrees (41.3%) comprising the majority. This distribution is consistent with prior descriptions of active users of urban xiangqin platforms in China (Ji, 2015; Yeung & Hu, 2016). In terms of occupation, corporate employees constituted the largest group (63.2%), aligning with Shanghai's labor structure characterized by professional and managerial employment. Prior studies also suggest that fast-paced urban work and limited social time may increase reliance on platform-mediated partner search (Chan, 2021; To, 2013; Liu, 2016). In addition, 90.0% of respondents reported urban hukou. In the Chinese marriage context, hukou is often linked to institutional resources (e.g., education and housing) and is relevant to partner evaluation; the high share of urban hukou in this sample suggests a concentration of respondents with relatively stronger bargaining positions in the marriage market (Zhang & Sun, 2014; Hu & Qian, 2016; Liu & Mu, 2022).

It is also important to note that the sample's distribution across gender, education, and occupation makes it an ideal type for this study: it represents urban young adults who are deeply involved in the "marital capitalization" dynamic. This group is more likely to rely on profile enhancement to compete for visibility under algorithmic ranking.

Table 3. Demographic characteristics of survey respondents (N = 201)

Variable	Category	n	%
Age	22–29	91	45.3
	30–39	92	45.8
	40–49	18	9.0
Gender	Male	90	44.8
	Female	111	55.2
Education	Junior college or below	5	2.5
	Bachelor	104	51.7
	Master	83	41.3
	Doctoral degree	9	4.5
Marital status	Single	175	87.1
	Married	10	5.0
	Divorced	16	8.0
Hukou (Household Registration)	Rural	20	10.0
	Urban	181	90.0
Occupation	Student	3	1.5
	Public sector employee	22	10.9
	Corporate employee	127	63.2
	Freelancer	32	15.9
	Self-employed	14	7.0
	Other	3	1.5

4.1.2 Evaluation of the Measurement Model

Before conducting the structural path analysis, we evaluated the measurement model following recommended procedures for PLS-SEM (Hair et al., 2019) to assess reliability and validity and to ensure the quality of latent variable indicators and the robustness of model inference.

As shown in Table 4, all indicator loadings ranged from 0.73 to 0.92, exceeding the recommended threshold of 0.708. For each construct, Cronbach's α (0.879–0.942), composite reliability (CR) (0.918–0.954), and average variance extracted (AVE) (0.629–0.776) met recommended criteria (α and CR > 0.70; AVE > 0.50; Fornell & Larcker, 1981), indicating satisfactory internal consistency and convergent validity after contextual adaptation of the scales.

Discriminant validity was assessed using the Fornell–Larcker criterion and the HTMT test (Tables 5 and 6). In addition, Harman's single-factor test showed that the first factor accounted for 38.179% of the variance (<40%), suggesting that common method bias was not a major concern.

Table 4. Reliability and convergent validity

Construct	Items	Loadings	Cronbach's α	CR	AVE
ATT	ATT1	.882	.927	.943	.734
	ATT2	.865			
	ATT3	.811			
	ATT4	.835			
	ATT5	.841			
	ATT6	.904			
IN	IN1	.929	.942	.954	.776
	IN2	.890			
	IN3	.832			
	IN4	.839			
	IN5	.866			
	IN6	.925			
PBC	PBC1	.900	.933	.947	.749
	PBC2	.874			
	PBC3	.825			
	PBC4	.834			
	PBC5	.847			
	PBC6	.911			
SN	SN1	.872	.879	.910	.629
	SN2	.811			
	SN3	.710			
	SN4	.707			
	SN5	.740			
	SN6	.897			

Table 5. Discriminant validity (Fornell–Larcker criterion)

Construct	ATT	IN	PBC	SN
ATT	**.857**			
IN	.648	**.881**		
PBC	.538	.666	**.866**	
SN	.270	.256	.342	**.793**

Table 6. HTMT ratio

Construct	ATT	IN	PBC	SN
ATT	—			
IN	.687	—		
PBC	.572	.707	—	
SN	.297	.281	.451	—

4.1.3 Structural Model: Path Coefficients and Theoretical Interpretation

Structural model results are reported in Table 7. Overall, the TPB model explained 63.7% of the variance in profile enhancement intention ($R^2 = 0.637$), indicating substantial explanatory power in the xiangqin platform context. Hypothesis testing showed that attitude (ATT → IN, $\beta = 0.253$, $p < .001$) and perceived behavioral control (PBC → IN, $\beta = 0.277$, $p < .001$) were significant, supporting H1 and H3. The path from subjective norm to intention was not significant (SN → IN, $\beta = 0.036$, $p = .722$), and H2 was not supported. Overall, profile enhancement intention was primarily driven by users' evaluations of expected outcomes and feasibility judgments. This pattern is consistent with TPB's emphasis on attitude and perceived control as key predictors of intention (Ajzen, 1991; La Barbera & Ajzen, 2020) and aligns with findings in some digital behavior studies suggesting that normative influence may be weaker or operate indirectly (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2011; Zhao et al., 2023).

Table 7. Structural Model Results (Hypothesis Testing)

Path	β	t-value	p-value	Result
ATT → IN	.253	4.635	< .001	Supported
SN → IN	.036	0.355	.722	Not supported
PBC → IN	.277	3.832	< .001	Supported

It is important to note that a non-significant SN path does not necessarily indicate the absence of normative influence. Prior TPB extension research offers plausible explanations: for highly private and context-sensitive behaviors, norms may not affect intention through a direct path, but may instead operate through indirect mechanisms such as risk perception, impression management, or self-monitoring (Rivis & Sheeran, 2003; La Barbera & Ajzen, 2020; Shrestha, 2025). Research on online self-presentation and digital identity similarly suggests that when individuals must weigh authenticity, attractiveness, and potential reputational risks, they tend to rely more on internal judgment rather than follow external norms in a linear way (Sharabi, 2021). In xiangqin apps—semi-public, traceable, and highly structured environments—such indirect mechanisms may be further amplified, making direct normative pressure appear weak in the statistical model. In other words, the non-significant SN coefficient may indicate that normative pressure has been absorbed into other evaluative dimensions rather than disappearing.

Based on this interpretation, the quantitative results show a clear but incomplete structure: profile enhancement intention is statistically driven mainly by users' self-assessments of expected benefits and perceived feasibility, while external norms do not emerge as a distinct direct predictor. The institutional logic of digital marriage platforms may allow greater room for individual maneuvering, contributing to instability in the normative path within this context. However, while the quantitative data suggest the possibility of indirect mechanisms, they cannot specify how these mechanisms operate within China's marriage-related cultural context. To interpret the observed shift in normative effects, qualitative evidence is needed to provide a more detailed empirical account of the mechanisms underlying this statistical pattern.

4.2 Cultural Mechanisms of Profile Enhancement: Integrated Qualitative Findings

4.2.1 Algorithmic Rationality and the Stratified Self: The Value–Risk Calculus of Visibility

The interviews clarify that the strong quantitative effects of ATT and PBC on IN are not driven by an aesthetic appetite for "beautification." They are better explained by an ongoing value - risk calculus of visibility that is specific to digitally mediated xiangqin infrastructures. Within this calculus, the profile is no longer treated as a window onto the self. It functions more like a continuously maintained market-facing dossier, closer to a job résumé than a space of expressive play: users work within a limited set of

platform fields to secure algorithmic exposure and competitive standing, while managing the identity risks and emotional costs that follow from the platform's chain of verification, offline meeting, and the potential spillover into one's wider relational network (Illouz, 2012; Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022).

Multiple participants described the profile as an information asset that must be actively "managed," motivated less by vanity than by anxiety about survivability in a crowded marketplace. P7's account is illustrative:

"It's a necessary strategy—like job hunting… You can't not edit your photos, because all the girls do… If you don't, your profile just gets buried." (P7)

P2 made the same point through an explicit market metaphor:" Profiles and résumés are basically the same—you're supposed to keep polishing them… A xiangqin app profile is the same thing. Both are facing the market." (P2)

Taken together, these statements specify the situational basis of ATT. A "positive attitude" toward enhancement does not primarily indicate endorsement of a particular beauty ideal; it reflects a practical recognition of platform competition rules. Enhancement is treated as worth doing because it buys exposure and matching opportunities. This helps explain why ATT emerges as a stable predictor in the quantitative model: here, attitude operates as an assessment of visibility returns, not as a straightforward expression of idealized selfhood.

On this basis, this study conceptualizes this orientation—enhancement undertaken to avoid being systematically buried or screened out—as **defensive enhancement.** Defensive enhancement refers to a mode of practice in which, under conditions of pervasive competition and near-universal optimization, users frame enhancement as a necessary strategy rather than an optional style choice. Unlike internalized norms, defensive enhancement does not require that users translate platform or marriage-market standards into personal value commitments. Instead, it reflects a risk-avoidant form of strategic compliance: users may not agree with these standards, yet they enact them within algorithmic comparison and ranking structures to prevent losses in visibility and opportunity.

Yet this instrumental orientation has clear limits. The interviews surface a tension the quantitative model cannot readily register: as heavy retouching, "professional" edits, and AI-generated images become commonplace, the gap between online presentation and embodied self is easier to widen—and harder to manage. Enhancement therefore carries an explicit exposure risk and a corresponding shame cost when the profile is "found out." P7 described the psychological burden in direct terms:

"A lot of my profile photos are AI-generated… Sometimes I don't dare to respond to people, because I'm afraid that when we meet they'll realize the gap is too big… Being pretty really does bring privileges, but the price is also huge." (P7)

Enhancement, then, is not a linear pursuit of "the better-looking, the better." It is a continuous adjustment between visibility returns and identity risk: the more intensive the enhancement, the larger the potential discrepancy and the greater the pressure of offline verification; the weaker the enhancement, the more likely one is to be buried by algorithmic ranking. It is within this tension that users develop highly situated judgments about how far to enhance.

These judgments are tightly bound to PBC. The interviews suggest that "control" is not an abstract sense of capability ("can I do it?") but a practical reading of the platform's field architecture and verification regime. Participants routinely distinguished between hard fields—attributes that are verifiable and effectively fixed by the platform (e.g., education, marital history, occupation)—and soft fields—elements with greater malleability (e.g., photos, self-descriptions, interest tags). Agency is concentrated in the latter. As P3 put it, "Education and job—you can't really change those, the platform verifies them," while P1 similarly noted that "some things are just fixed; you can only leave them there." This differentiation gives PBC its empirical meaning on xiangqin infrastructures: users are not simply "in control" or "not in control," but allocate strategy unevenly across fields under structural constraint.

Crucially, a limited zone of maneuver does not only produce additive enhancement. It also generates a second mechanism identified in this study: **reverse enhancement**. Reverse enhancement refers to the strategic lowering, blurring, or hiding of advantageous information in order to recalibrate the audience one becomes visible to and reduce exposure to risk—using the profile not only to attract but also to filter. P1's case illustrates this counterintuitive strategy:

"I'll adjust my income downward… I actually own a home, but I'll write that I don't… I'm really afraid of those guys… who want to latch on, like they can 'eat the family fortune'." (P1)

This case shows that enhancement is not necessarily a one-way operation of increasing desirability. It can also be a subtractive tactic aimed at reducing vulnerability. Unlike classic impression management or self-presentation optimization—typically oriented toward maximizing attractiveness and favorable evaluation—reverse enhancement functions as a selective visibility filter: by steering information flows, users screen out those perceived as likely to exploit, objectify, or pose relational risk. It is not "making oneself worse," but leveraging the flexibility of soft fields to offset the objectification risks that hard fields may invite, enabling self-protection and more targeted matching within the platform's structural seams.

Taken together, these findings suggest that profile enhancement in digital xiangqin contexts is not a stylistic preference for beautification. It is jointly propelled by ATT as an evaluation of whether visibility gains are worth pursuing, and by PBC as a judgment of what can be done within structurally bounded fields. Defensive enhancement and reverse enhancement both point to intention as an ongoing calculus of value, risk, and feasibility—helping to account for the stable predictive role of ATT and PBC observed in the quantitative model.

4.2.2 The Reconfiguration of Social Norms: From External Pressure to Embedded Governance

The non-significant SN path in the quantitative model should not be read as evidence that normative force is absent from Chinese xiangqin contexts. The interviews instead indicate a decisive reconfiguration of how norms operate within xiangqin platform infrastructures. Normative influence no longer works primarily through explicit interpersonal demands that directly raise intention. Rather, it is unpacked, absorbed, and re-embedded in platform mechanisms and everyday risk governance, making it more likely to appear statistically as an indirect or displaced effect. To capture this shift, this study proposes the concept of the **structural dissipation of norms**. Here, norms are not weakened; they are re-encoded through the platform's verification regime, screening logics, and visibility penalties, becoming an action environment rather than an external command. Unlike accounts of social surveillance, which presume identifiable watchers and a perceptible external gaze, structural dissipation highlights how norms become infrastructuralized—entering users' evaluative routines as background conditions of decision-making. Precisely because norms operate as built-in constraints and contingencies, they are difficult to detect through a direct SN → IN path.

First, family norms persist through a form of symbolic presence. Several participants reported editing their profiles with an imagined parental viewpoint in mind, even when parents did not directly participate in their platform use. P7 described this embedded self-regulation:

"My parents would definitely want me to show more 'traditional' things… They don't even know I'm using it, but once I think about how they might see it, I automatically hold back when I edit my profile." (P7)

Importantly, this influence does not typically take the form of "others require me to enhance." More often, it becomes a framework for judging what counts as appropriate or effective presentation. Norms are absorbed into assessments of value and anticipations of risk, and thus are more likely to register through ATT and related risk calculations than through a direct subjective-norms pathway. In other words, family norms function less as overt instructions than as baseline parameters in users' evaluative

grammar.

Second, platform mechanisms serve as the primary carrier of normative influence. Through real-name registration, credential checks (e.g., education and occupation), and filterable field design, xiangqin infrastructures translate conventional mate-selection standards into technical thresholds. Even when users nominally retain the option not to verify or to leave fields incomplete, they confront de facto exclusion when filters are widely enabled (e.g., "show verified users only"), resulting in practical market exit and losses in visibility. In this setting, norms are not enforced through interpersonal persuasion but institutionalized as endogenous platform rules: non-compliance becomes a visibility penalty. Normative pressure thus materializes as a visibility bargain—to enter higher-quality matching pools, users must yield certain information to satisfy verification and screening logics. This helps explain why SN appears weak statistically: the issue is not the disappearance of norms, but their absorption into the platform infrastructure, where they are experienced and enacted as part of a composite evaluation of benefits, risks, and feasibility.

Third, the hyper-local nature of xiangqin platform infrastructures—and the overlap of social circles they presume—reactivates the supervisory gaze of a familiar-society within digital space. Unlike anonymous, stranger-based dating imaginaries, participants repeatedly stressed that "the city is small" and "circles overlap," which obliges users to anticipate the eyes of potential acquaintances and manage presentational boundaries accordingly. P6's account of encountering a parent-introduced match on the platform captures this situational pressure:

"My first reaction was embarrassment. My second was relief: luckily, I hadn't written anything too exaggerated in my self-introduction." (P6)

This dynamic is often discussed through the language of social surveillance or context collapse. The interviews suggest, however, that the operative mechanism is not simply that "someone might be watching." Rather, traceability and circle overlap are translated into a durable risk expectation that becomes folded into users' value–risk calculations and feasibility judgments. In other words, the digital reproduction of familiar-society dynamics does not necessarily push users to enhance more, but it continuously sets the terms of enhancement: how far one can go, and which kinds of information require caution.

Finally, peer influence appeared in the interviews primarily as tactical advice and operational assistance (e.g., helping select photos, evaluating profile text). Its function is closer to a strategic resource than an externally binding norm. Users selectively take up friends' suggestions, but do not necessarily experience them as coercive pressure. Normative force, in this setting, is therefore less about peer "persuasion" and more centrally anchored in three sites: the symbolic presence of family evaluation, the platform's technical thresholds, and hyper-local networked expectations of reputational risk.

Taken together, SN have not lost force on xiangqin platform infrastructures; they have been structurally reworked. Normative influence is internalized through an imagined family standpoint, re-encoded through the platform's verification and filtering logics, and sustained through hyper-local expectations of traceability and reputational risk. As a result, norms are more likely to shape intention indirectly—by inflecting the benefit-risk-feasibility evaluations captured by ATT and PBC—rather than appearing as a distinct direct SN → IN effect. This helps explain why SN can register as weak in the structural model while remaining experientially compelling and socially consequential: within platformed intimacy, norms increasingly operate as embedded governance rather than as overt external pressure.

5.Conclusion

Using an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design, this study traces how profile enhancement intentions form and how enhancement is enacted on xiangqin app infrastructures among users in Shanghai. The findings move three claims from conceptual propositions to empirical conclusions. First,

profile enhancement on xiangqin platforms operates as a structured cultural practice: it is less a set of isolated beautification tactics than an ongoing negotiation of visibility shaped by platform fields, marital stratification, and culturally salient scripts. Second, TPB requires contextual re-specification in highly normative, platform-organized settings, where intention formation resembles a composite weighing of expected benefits, perceived feasibility, and normative risk under structural constraint. Third, the weak SN effect in the structural model does not indicate the absence of norms; rather, normative force is decomposed and embedded into users' evaluative routines through platform classification, familistic valuation, and anticipatory risk management, remaining socially consequential in practice.

Quantitatively, ATT and PBC show stable explanatory power for profile enhancement intention, whereas SN does not produce a significant direct path. The qualitative evidence clarifies that the significance of ATT reflects an instrumental evaluation oriented toward visibility returns: participants treat enhancement as a necessary strategy to increase exposure and matching efficiency under algorithmic ranking and competition, not simply as an aesthetic preference. In this sense, enhancement often takes the form of defensive enhancement—strategic compliance with visibility rules in an environment of generalized optimization, even when users do not endorse the underlying mate-selection standards.

The salience of PBC similarly extends beyond technical capability. It captures users' practical recognition of, and maneuvering within, the platform's structural boundaries. Participants commonly differentiate between verifiable, locked "hard fields" (e.g., education, marital history) and more malleable "soft fields" (e.g., photos, self-descriptions, tags), concentrating their strategic adjustments on the latter. This helps explain why agency in xiangqin contexts often appears as fine-grained calibration within limited actionable space rather than unconstrained identity reinvention. The interviews further identify reverse enhancement: some users downplay income, conceal assets, or reduce the salience of advantageous attributes to filter out opportunistic or objectifying attention. This finding complicates a single "attractiveness maximization" paradigm and shows that, in high-risk marriage markets, enhancement can also operate through risk minimization.

In this light, the weak statistical effect of SN is better understood as a structural relocation of normative mechanisms. The qualitative findings show that family expectations often enter users' judgments as an internal reference point, naturalizing criteria such as "decency," "stability," and "reliability" as taken-for-granted filters rather than explicit external demands. At the same time, platform verification regimes, field ordering, and screening functions translate mate-selection norms into technical thresholds, where the penalty of "not verified → low visibility" replaces direct interpersonal pressure. In addition, the hyper-local and traceable character of urban xiangqin networks intensifies anticipatory reputational risk, prompting users to maintain a threshold of "believable authenticity" and to manage disclosure cautiously. Normative influence, then, has not disappeared; it continues to shape how users evaluate benefits, risks, and feasibility by operating as an action environment—the empirical reality captured by what this article terms the structural dissipation of norms.

Overall, the study argues that profile enhancement on xiangqin app infrastructures is a structured practice jointly shaped by cultural scripts, platform architectures, and users' strategic action. It extends digital intimacy research beyond Western, lower-normativity settings and suggests that "self-presentation" should be analyzed not only as an individual tactic but through frameworks that link platform infrastructures to social stratification. For platform governance, the results highlight that fields and verification mechanisms are not neutral tools: they can amplify existing stratification criteria and unequal risk exposure through visibility allocation. For user practice, profile enhancement is better conceptualized as risk governance and visibility management under constraint than as a moral dichotomy of "authentic" versus "inauthentic."

The study has several limitations. First, the sample is concentrated in Shanghai and is relatively

highly educated; the conclusions therefore better represent advantaged segments of the urban marriage market. Future work should examine different city tiers and social strata to assess variation in enhancement mechanisms and risk logics. Second, the design is cross-sectional. Longitudinal or stage-based research could track how profile enhancement shifts across the sequence of matching, interaction, meeting offline, and relationship formation, and test how normative influence relocates across stages. Third, future studies could combine comparative interface analysis, field experiments, or platform behavioral data to more precisely estimate how field structures and algorithmic weighting shape enhancement strategies, filtering practices, and visibility distribution.

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